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Who am I?: Using *Dracula* and Modern Vampire Tales to Examine Identity

A common theme found in gothic texts, like Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), is the concept of identity. This text and gothic in general, posit questions about how our identities as human beings. These questions were of particular interest during the 19th century when medical and scientific advancements and categorization change society’s ideas about being human. This was especially true toward the end of the century when the fears of the fin-de-siècle led to the creation of a number of canonical gothic texts. These texts tried to examine and answer the questions about what it would mean to be from both the 19th and 20th centuries. Would humanity change as the century changed?

While many have focused on the post-colonial features of Dracula, including how the Count is physically described, for my presentation, I will use an historical examination of the gothic and the gothic archetypal character of the vampire to look at why monsters were popular in the past and why they have maintained their popularity today. Through this exploration, I will compare how *Dracula* and its source text, John Polidori’s *The Vampyre*, addressed cultural and social concerns of the Victorian and Romantic eras, respectively. To understand why the supernatural remains relevant and important in today’s society, I will also briefly examine modern vampires like those on *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer, Angel,* and *Moonlight.* All of the characters, including Dracula, examine the duality of identity since the vampire was once human, but has become something in-between life and death. More recent vampires include a desire to become human again, which has become an interesting adaptation of the genre, which reflects modern concerns about being human.

I will argue that the fears we have today about ourselves and our identities are similar to the fears of the 19th century fin-de-siècle. Also, the vampire represents “the other” and as such allows us to question what it means to be “othered.” However, since vampires were once human, we can examine what happens when one was once considered “normal”, but became “othered”? How does one’s identity change? What about those who have always been outside the norm? These are all questions that the gothic monsters, and vampires in particular, help us to understand, even if these stories are not fully able to answer those questions that they raise. Because of the uniqueness of the supernatural vampire as one that straddles the line between human and non-human, the archetype allows us to question what it means to be human and forces us to question what it means to be a monster.